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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 003359

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO AND NEA/I. NSC FOR PHEE AND VROOMAN.

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TAGS: [IR](#) [IZ](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)
SUBJECT: ISCI CHAIRMAN AMMAR AL-HAKIM ON REGIONAL
ENGAGEMENT, IRAN, AND ELECTIONS

REF: BAGHDAD 3334

Classified By: A/DCM GARY A. GRAPPO FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: A/DCM on December 23, 2009 met with Chairman of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) Ammar al-Hakim to discuss al-Hakim's recent regional engagement tour, election planning, and the Fakkah oil field dispute. Al-Hakim projected a more moderate tone than in previous meetings, which, in keeping with his recent public statements, likely reflects an awareness of the message put forward prior to the Iraqi national election. He appeared reluctant to directly criticize other parties within the Iraqi government, but instead highlighted what he considered the Iraqi National Alliance's (INA) ability to serve as a "bridge among all groups" in Iraq. Additionally, al-Hakim predicted a short government formation period as a result of increasing pre-election discussions among coalitions. Al-Hakim appeared to downplay the significance of the recent Fakkah oil field incident and blamed the media for exacerbating the situation. Though critical of Iranian action related to ongoing border disputes between Iran and Iraq, al-Hakim did not elaborate on the details of his exchanges with Iranian leadership regarding this matter. End Summary and Comment.

AL-HAKIM'S REGIONAL ENGAGEMENT TOUR

¶2. (C) During a meeting with ISCI Chairman Ammar al-Hakim on December 23, A/DCM stressed the U.S. government's support for Iraqi efforts to increase regional engagement and discussed the U.S. interest in fostering Iraq's regional engagement and integration. Al-Hakim recognized the importance of both Iraqi officials and the U.S. government working to strengthen Iraq's regional relations, especially with Saudi Arabia, and welcomed U.S. assistance in promoting regional engagement as well as increased investment in Iraq. He noted a change in the way neighboring Arab states view Iraq and an increasing regional interest in the Iraqi national election. Al-Hakim believed that Arab states now accept the political establishment formed in Iraq as legitimate and speculated that the withdrawal of U.S. forces from cities has added to the idea that Iraqis are increasingly independent and capable of maintaining their own security.

¶3. (C) Between mid-November and mid-December 2009, al-Hakim held meetings with the senior leadership of Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Jordan, Turkey, and Syria. Al-Hakim told A/DCM that the leaders with whom he met were interested in Iraqi affairs, but lacked a clear picture of the situation in Iraq because of what he described as the often distorted image of

Iraq created in the media. Al-Hakim provided neighboring leaders with his view of the security and economic situation in Iraq, stressing that Iraq is moving forward and that it is not only in the interest of Arab states to establish relationships with Iraq, but something on which Iraq would insist. Al-Hakim also said that he tried to make clear to regional leaders that Iraq has no interest in carrying on disputes with neighboring countries. He asserted that Iraq's relationship with Iran was not the problem, but rather the lack of solid relations with neighboring Arab states. Al-Hakim acknowledged that ISCI is often accused of having a QAL-Hakim acknowledged that ISCI is often accused of having a special relationship with Iran, but stressed that ISCI uses its connections in Tehran for the interest of Iraq and said that similar relationships were needed with neighboring Arab states.

SEEKING REGIONAL ASSISTANCE ON SAUDI ENGAGEMENT

14. (C) Al-Hakim said that he asked for assistance from regional leaders in improving Iraq's relationship with Saudi Arabia. Without specifying, al-Hakim said that some of the leaders offered to provide such assistance, but only following the Iraqi national election. Al-Hakim stressed that Iraq is ready to develop and improve relations with Riyadh, but highlighted three primary obstacles to improved relations. First, al-Hakim suggested that the Saudi King's perception of the Iraqi leadership has had a negative impact on bilateral relations, and that once such a perception is formed, it is very often hard to change. Second, he noted

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that religious differences between the two nations stand as an obstacle to improved relations, and that some within the Saudi regime, though possibly not the King himself, identify the large Iraqi Shi'a population as "non-believers." Third, he said that Arab leaders may perceive the Iraqi democracy as a threat to their regimes, a concern which al-Hakim indicated had been highlighted in the past by commentary from some U.S. leaders portraying Iraq as a catalyst for democracy in the region. Additionally, al-Hakim expressed his view that the international role Saudi Arabia currently plays is not based on democratic institutions or cultural achievements, but rather on oil wealth alone, and suggested that the Saudi leadership is threatened by Iraqi oil reserves and Saudi fears Qout the future regional influence those reserves could give Iraq.

ELECTIONS, THE INA, AND COALITION BUILDING

15. (C) According to al-Hakim, Iraq must focus on holding a transparent and peaceful national election to maintain social cohesion, as any perceived injustice related to the election would have a long-term impact. Additionally, al-Hakim said he hoped to see legitimate campaigning free from foreign interference. Al-Hakim believed the U.S. could play a role in stressing to all Iraqis that the elections represent a beginning and a positive step for Iraq. He stressed that the U.S. should be a partner of Iraq and not of specific groups within Iraq, and as such, must support the political process writ large and not certain players within the process. (COMMENT: ISCI representatives at all levels have complained to us about the U.S.'s misunderstanding and mischaracterization of its relationship with Iran, and are concerned that the U.S. would actively work against the appointment of a prime minister from ISCI, because of its presumed close ties to Tehran. END COMMENT.)

16. (C) Al-Hakim discussed the pivotal role of alliances in fostering national reconciliation and believed the Iraqi National Alliance (INA) was the only one that could "guarantee stability and development" following the election,

as the INA was capable of reaching all groups in Iraq. Al-Hakim stated that there has been some discussion among the largest coalitions regarding forming a "national front" post-election, noting that the INA has strong contacts with former Prime Minister Allawi, Prime Minister Maliki, the Kurds, Minister of Interior Bolani, and the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), and could serve as a bridge among all parties. Al-Hakim also speculated that because coalitions have worked extensively prior to the election, he did not believe the government formation process would take as long as some people were predicting and could actually be done in as short a time period as two weeks. He noted that the speed of government formation would depend on the acceptability of candidates chosen, and that the INA should have no problem in this regard as candidates have already been thoroughly scrutinized.

PRESIDENCY COUNCIL

17. (C) Al-Hakim said there were two options regarding the future of the Iraqi presidency; either eliminate the Presidency Council (PC) as called for under the Iraqi QPresidency Council (PC) as called for under the Iraqi constitution or amend the constitution to extend the mandate of the PC for an additional four years. He noted that Iraq still needs to build confidence among all groups, without any group feeling excluded, implying he would prefer to see the mandate of the PC extended at least another four years. Al-Hakim stated that the INA would prefer to hold a referendum regarding the PC on the same day as the national election, which he thought could be "easily" done, but that the IIP wants to delay a constitutional amendment until after the election (septel forthcoming).

FAKKAH OIL FIELD DISPUTE AND THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN
ESCALATING TENSIONS

18. (C) With regard to the recent dispute over the Fakkah oil field (see reftel), al-Hakim stated that the Iraqi government

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inherited problems with neighboring countries from the former Iraqi regime, to include an unclearly delineated border with Iran. According to al-Hakim, the Iranians claim that the field is in a disputed area and he believed the current incident began when an Iraqi military unit moved to or near the Fakkah field and an Iranian unit moved in response. Al-Hakim told A/DCM that the oil field dispute was being escalated by the media, and argued that this should be dealt with discreetly through political negotiations. Al-Hakim said that he had discussed the need to resolve this and similar border disputes with Iranian leadership and intelligence, noting that Iranian actions were "unacceptable." He said that the Iranians he spoke with had been responsive to working to resolve such issues through the Joint Committee. (NFI) Al-Hakim noted that Baghdad wanted to give the impression that bilateral border negotiations should be based on the Algiers Accord, but that the GOI does not actually want border negotiations based on such.

19. (C) Comment: There are three noteworthy points from this discussion. First, al-Hakim seemed to want to downplay the importance of the recent Iranian intrusion at the Fakkah oil field but also appeared somewhat embarrassed because of the difficult position in which the Iranians had put parties with close ties to Tehran. There was doubtlessly more to his phone conversations with Tehran than he let on. Second, unlike previous occasions, al-Hakim avoided criticizing the Sunnis or even Da'wa, a reflection of the arrangement he and other potential post-election coalition partners may have reached regarding direct attacks on one another. As an example, most of the media attacks on Tehran and Iraqi

parties with ties to Tehran have been Sunni-inspired, an assertion al-Hakim pointedly avoided, however. Third, al-Hakim is among several senior Iraqi political figures (including President Talabani, DPM Issawi and former PM Allawi) who have confirmed ongoing talks about the post-election government formation process.

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